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## **The role of the corpse in bereavement**

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### **Introduction**

Viewing the body has been regarded by bereavement theorists and practitioners to play a key role in coming to terms with the ‘reality’ of death and making a healthy adjustment after bereavement. Not viewing the body has been linked to continued ‘searching’ for the lost loved one and failing to move on in life. Yet, this perception is based on a clear-cut distinction between life and death, a distinction that does not adequately reflect reported experiences of bereaved people. Rather, these experiences have revealed that departed loved ones live on in a social sense beyond their biological demise. Indeed, the extent to which the dead remain part of the lives of the living is evidenced in the very active engagement of the living in preserving deceased loved ones’ identities, not only in more formalised memorial activities, but more informally in conversation and other rituals of daily living, in media representations and the use of internet memorial sites. This active engagement in keeping the dead socially alive is also apparent in encounters with the corpse.

This article draws on some recollections from interviews with bereaved individuals (Valentine 2008)<sup>1</sup> of the impact of encountering the corpse on their experience of loss. These recollections suggest that, far from being a straightforward matter of facing unequivocal proof of death, what is actually encountered is far more complex and ambiguous, reflecting the way in which the corpse continues or ceases to evoke the person who once lived.

### **The corpse as a symbol of absence**

For some bereaved individuals, such as Roy, Fiona and Pat<sup>2</sup>, viewing the body could indeed represent a powerful symbol of the ‘absence’ of the person who once inhabited it:

*“I kept saying it’s not dad, it’s not dad, it’s just a shell” (Roy).*

*“...it didn’t look like nan. She was sort of quite bloated.....and when you see somebody like that you almost wish you hadn’t gone to see then and you’d remembered them as you’d last seen them...” (Fiona).*

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<sup>1</sup> These interviews form part of a qualitative research project looking at how bereaved individuals makes sense of losing loved ones in contemporary Britain. The project has been published as a book: Valentine, C. (2008) *Bereavement Narratives: Continuing Bonds in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. London, New York: Routledge.

<sup>2</sup> Pseudonyms have been used to protect confidentiality.

*“And I went to see her in the Chapel of Rest but it didn’t look like her – it didn’t look like her at all. That was not a good experience. I mean it wasn’t a bad experience like you know traumatic. It was just like why did I come here, what was I looking for? I was looking for Enid but this is just a body, this is not Enid. And she didn’t look like Enid anyway, she looked like a 96 year old ravaged, injured woman which I know I’m sure she was, but there was no life there by definition really” (Pat).*

Thus, for these three individuals the corpse, having ceased to evoke the once living person, had become an ‘object’ rather than a ‘subject. Yet, for Pat, this experience, rather than amounting to unequivocal proof of death, instead provided the impetus to search elsewhere for her deceased Aunt’s presence. She further conveyed that ‘searching’ behaviour was not necessarily a sign of failing to come to terms with biological death:

*“So I must have spent 2 minutes there and then just walked straight out again and chose to figure out a different way to remember her” (Pat).*

### **The corpse as paradoxical**

Pat’s reflections suggested that encountering absence could evoke the deceased loved one’s presence as being located elsewhere. For Lynne it was the other way round, in that the corpse was experienced as an unrecognisable and disturbing *presence* that brought home her mother’s absence:

*“I went in but I couldn’t stay ‘cos I was you know – out I can’t stand it um.... Well she just looked so awful. ‘Cos A you thought any minute now she’s gonna open her eyes and you’re sort of waiting for that and on the other hand you’re seeing someone who’s not there any more. She just wasn’t there any more...” (Lynne).*

Indeed, Lynne’s response conveyed that the dead body could take on a double meaning for the survivor. In this case it represented both an absence of the person who once inhabited it as well as a frightening presence that threatened to come to life.

For Andy too, his father’s body evoked both his presence and absence, though on two separate occasions. After preparing his father’s body according to the Sikh custom in which *“the significance of washing him in yoghurt is to make him clean to go to god”*, Andy was left with a profound sense of absence:

*“...and it was just the horriblest thing actually like seeing my dad inside the coffin. It was really really hard thing to actually see. I think it kind of hit me then.....” (Andy).*

Prior to this, Andy had already seen his father’s body in the hospital, where he died very suddenly and unexpectedly in intensive care. It was not surprising that, at this point, Andy was unable to ‘objectify’ his father’s body and take in the ‘reality’ of his death:

*“Went to see my dad in intensive care and like he just looked like he was still alive and it was, see what I mean, they've got the wrong person, they've got the wrong person - and it still hadn't hit me ...” (Andy).*

Rather his perception of his father's 'subjectivity' remained linked to his physical presence rather than his body becoming an object. Andy's experience thus provides an example of how bereaved people may 'view' the body differently at different times.

### **The corpse as evoking presence**

Though encountering the corpse could evoke a powerful sense of absence for bereaved people, as these examples have conveyed, this absence was far from unequivocal. Rather it was an absence that could evoke a presence that was located beyond the body. The corpse could also bring home the departed loved one's absence through evoking a disturbing and frightening presence. Indeed, as illustrated by Lynne and Pat, the corpse could be invested with agency in that, in each case, it gave them the impetus to act in a particular manner. Thus Pat's encounter with her Aunt's body and Lynne's with her mother's, prompted each of them, for different reasons, to leave the mortuary in a hurry.

For others, such encounters posed an even more explicit challenge to the common-sense assumption that the corpse offered unequivocal proof of social as well as biological death. For Fiona and Elisabeth, the physical remains of their father and husband respectively, evoked a profound sense of continuing presence to the extent that they found themselves engaging and interacting with their loved ones' remains:

*“But we went in and he did look like dad and he did look like he was just asleep. And we just stood around, not – we weren't laughing at dad we were sort of laughing with dad thinking he's at rest now. He looks very peaceful and you know – we'd like to think he's sort of stood with us watching us and laughing with us ...in a way it was quite nice to see him like that because how he was in the hospital was quite difficult - whereas he looked like dad again” (Fiona).*

*“...and the grandchildren came down with me once because they wanted to see him. And we actually dressed him in t-shirt and jeans rather than the white silk sort of things they put on” (Elisabeth).*

Fiona's and Elisabeth's recollections provide an example of the way that bereaved people's behaviour towards the corpse may personalise and, like Pat and Lynne, invest it with agency.

Elisabeth further revealed that her demonstration of affectionate behaviour towards her husband's remains was considered inappropriate and disturbing by close others in the way it defied the boundaries between the living and the dead:

*“I just wanted to hold him and be with him but my mother and my eldest daughter were really worried about me.....they said it's just not right – you're always up there at the cemetery or down at the funeral parlour” (Elisabeth)*

Yet for Elisabeth her husband's remains were so powerfully evocative of his presence that she expressed wanting to throw herself on his coffin during his burial.

## **Conclusion**

These recollections of bereaved people have challenged the common sense assumption that the corpse provides unequivocal evidence of social as well as biological death. For this assumption does not take into account that a person's social presence and significance for the living continues beyond the grave. Thus, in talking about their departed loved ones, those I interviewed conveyed the mutable and contingent nature of the 'reality of death', depending on the extent to which the corpse continued or ceased to evoke the once living person. The boundary between life and death was experienced as fluid, ambiguous and shifting rather than clear-cut, the dead retaining a social presence in the lives of the living that shaped the way survivors grieved, including the meanings given to their encounters with the corpse.

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